

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year



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Angela Kelly

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Hello, Empowered Principals. Welcome to Episode 126.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. A not-so-typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host, certified life coach, Angela Kelly Robeck.

Well hello, my empowered leaders. Happy Tuesday. And welcome to the end of May. Thank goodness. It is so strange to be recording these podcasts a month in advance because our future is so unknown right now. So, I hope the information I'm providing in May is still relevant because I'm recording these in the middle of April.

And as of right now, we have no certainty how long this quarantine will continue. It could be that by the end of May when you're listening to this, we are totally able to reconnect with one another and that really feels so far away right now because I think of how strange it will feel to actually get back into normal social activities.

And I have to admit, there is a part of me that is very grateful to have experienced this. It truly has been a test of mental and emotional stamina and an experience that has been awful in so many ways with so much loss, so much pain and sadness in the world, so much change, so much frustration and overwhelm.

There's also this opportunity that is giving birth to new ideas and to new innovations. It is pretty fascinating to be a part of this historical moment in time. And we are both individually and collectively learning so much about our world, the systems that we have in place, the organizations, one

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

another. We're learning about the capacity to be human and to support and to love.

And we're also learning so much about ourselves; what we're willing to contribute, what we're willing to give, how much are we willing to go through to help people and to allow ourselves to experience discomfort and change and frustration in order to serve the greater good.

We're having to feel so many feelings and allow those feelings to be present, even when we don't want them to be there, and we're still showing up in spite of those negative emotions. And we're learning that feeling better doesn't always happen right away.

Sometimes, it's an extended period of time. At least for me, that's what I'm noticing. This isn't going away any time soon. And having to process the emotions that are coming with this experience, it's not just a one and done scenario. It's happening over and over again.

And sometimes, these feelings that we're having are lingering for days or weeks or perhaps even months. And that's what I want to address in today's podcast.

The heartache of having schools closed for the year has been so painful for many educators. So many principals and teachers are crushed by the thought of not reopening schools, of not being able to see your students again. And as educators, we put so much of ourselves into our work. We are in the business of people and we are very attached to those we teach and those we serve.

Having the year come to an unexpected halt with no option of bringing closure to the classroom or the school year and the relationships that come

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

with that school year, your teachers and your colleagues and your staff, your students, your families. This has been a huge blow to people.

One of my close friends, Jessica, is a third-grade teacher here in the Bay Area. And she was sending me photos while she was cleaning out her classroom. She was called in; the staff were called in one at a time to come in and spend a few minutes cleaning out their students' supplies. They basically were given trash bags, they were given nametags, labels to put on the bags, and they were supposed to put all the items into the bag, label the bag, and then the support staff would, the next day, set them out and the parents could drive through and pick up all of the supplies, the workbooks, all the tools the kids would need for remote learning for the rest of the year.

And she was very devastated by this. She said, "This doesn't feel right. It doesn't feel good to end my students' relationship for the year by putting all of their things in a trash bag. They deserve more than this." She was really sad about it. It broke my heart.

And I agree with her. Students deserve more than receiving their items in a trash bag. But this is the reality of what we're facing and so we're going to have to learn to allow those emotions to be present while we're doing something that doesn't feel good to us.

One of my former clients reached out the other day saying that she doesn't feel she can even wrap her head around what's happening. It just felt too much for her. It doesn't feel like the tight-knit school she was used to having and she felt like her kids were being taken away and that positive school culture and climate was being kind of ripped out of her hands.

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

All of the work they had done on culture, she just felt like it had vanished. And I just want to share with you that all of those feelings are valid. And we have to allow them in spite of it having been taken away.

And you're not alone if you feel this way. Principals from all over the country are expressing this same type of pain and loss. The abrupt end of the school year is painful because it feels similar to a death. And in fact, it actually is a form of death.

It feels like a death in the sense that you're having to say goodbye when you weren't expecting you would have to say goodbye, or you weren't ready to say goodbye. Your brain wasn't thinking you were going to have to say goodbye to your kids in the middle of March.

And it's also having to say goodbye without getting to say goodbye in the way that you would prefer to, the way you normally do, the way you want to. The end of the school year is full of traditions, routines, and celebrations.

It's a great time of the year that teachers and students alike look forward to. So, we're not experiencing those traditions and rituals that we normally experience. So, for both kids and adults, it feels like we're left hanging, just unanswered, open ended.

This feeling happens when we lose a loved one unexpectedly. We grieve for them. We grieve that we didn't get to say goodbye the way that we wanted to or that we didn't get to say goodbye at all. And the same thing is happening in our schools.

We're grieving that we can't say goodbye in the way that we'd like to say goodbye to our students, that we can't send them off with some closure.

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

And so, we don't have the rituals and the routines we normally have to say goodbye, but for many of the kids, we at least have this online presence and this online connection with them.

But there are kids in our classrooms that we don't have any connection with them, for whatever reason. They don't have the resources or they don't understand how or they don't have internet, hardware, whatever it is. Those connections, the loss of those connections feel especially painful.

And the truth is that there might be some of your students that you never hear from again or never see again because who knows how long this is going to go on, and they may have to move, they may have to relocate, they may have to find a new means to live. And you might never know. You might not ever have closure with some of your kids.

And this is truly heartbreaking for educators. It's also the death of our hopes and dreams for the year. So, it isn't just about losing the connections with the kids and losing the chance to say goodbye in the way that we normally do. We also are grieving the loss of our hopes or dreams or wishes or expectations for the year.

When you planned out your school year last summer, you never anticipated not being able to finish the year on campus. You had goals that you were hoping to achieve and experiences that you wanted to have as a school leader. Many of my clients are first-year principals and while they have been pretty good about flexing during this new uncharted territory, they're going with the flow amidst all the changes, but they're feeling sad because they're thinking to themselves, "I didn't get to have the full first-year experience."

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

So, there was some relief in working remotely, perhaps. But there's also that disappointment in that they're not getting that full first-year campus experience and they feel like they've lost the opportunity to learn and grow as a first-year leader in the traditional sense, leading from school in a traditional sense.

Now, they're gaining skillsets that many of us never had the option to try out, which is amazing and wonderful, but they're also sad at the loss of that first-year experience.

Thirdly, it's also having to let go of helping your students and your teachers achieve their goals and dreams for the year. As a school leader, it's not just your own personal and professional goals that you have to let go of right now. You also have invested your time and energy and you're attached to the goals of your staff and your students.

Knowing kids who've worked really hard this year and also teachers who've worked really hard this year who are just getting the hang of their classroom management feels like a letdown. When you see those kids striving so hard or kids who were struggling who are now starting to fly and then you don't get to see the end of that, that feels really painful.

And for those teachers you were working so closely with to get them up and running, it's a bummer to have to let that go. So, knowing there are kids out there who aren't in the safest of conditions or who have families severely struggling to make ends meet, knowing that you can't help them in your way is also very painful.

So, there are many aspects of this situation that are creating a sense of grief. And I want you to acknowledge that. This is a very painful confusing time. This is a time when we're not supposed to be feeling completely

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

certain, completely assured of our leadership, completely positive and happy and strong and grateful for everything. No, it's okay to feel the sadness, to allow time and space for grief and mourning the loss of the year. Because that's what we're doing.

What I've noticed is that we have painful thoughts and feelings that come over our body in waves. There are moments when we're focused on other things in our work and our lives and we're not feeling the pain of the loss. And then the thoughts about the loss come back into our mind and all of a sudden we feel those waves of emotion and grief and sadness overcome us again.

Sometimes, we're just thinking about our own children and their homework or we're thinking about what to make for dinner again, or we're helping our teachers figure out Google Classroom. And when your brain is focused on those other things, you're not feeling that deep burn of the sadness.

But as soon as we do allow ourselves to think about that, those waves of sadness hit us over and over again. And it kind of feels like – I think about it like ocean waves. It comes in strong and then it resides and then it comes back in again and then it resides. And it starts to feel like you're drowning in sadness. That is grief. That is what it feels like.

Grief is defined as intense mental suffering. So, it is a part of the human experience. It is normal and expected that you're feeling this way. So, I want to talk about three different ways that people tend to handle grief, so you can identify which way you're handling your grief and try to steer yourself to being more accepting and allowing the grief to be present while still being able to maintain some sense of routine and schedule in your remote work situation.

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

So, one of the ways we handle grief is by avoiding it. Avoiding grief is what we do when we do everything possible to not allow it to be present. We don't talk about it. We act as if it isn't a thing. We pretend there's no problem. We distract ourselves from thinking about it. And any time it comes up, we kind of just distract ourselves and push the feeling away.

When we distract ourselves from an emotion, this is called buffering. Buffering happens when we don't want to feel pain. When we fear the experience of grief, we do something to distract ourselves in order to avoiding the painful thoughts.

So, if you're feeling deep stress about not getting to reunite with your students and staff this year and the thought feels too painful, too much to bear, like you just can't stand it, you might find yourself distracting your brain by trying to read about something different or going and getting a snack or watching TV or scrolling through social media or pouring a glass of wine.

There's all kinds of ways that our brain finds to distract us from feeling bad. Perhaps you might call up a bunch of friends and talk it through, or you might dive into a book, something that feels very cozy and soothing and comfortable. And in the moment, it feels like the right thing to do because the urge is to avoid that highly uncomfortable feeling.

And there is a time and place to relieve yourself from grieving. But there is a difference between allowing yourself to feel then taking a break, versus distracting yourself in an effort to avoid the emotion altogether. And the way to tell the difference between these two is that when you're buffering, the minute you stop buffering, you immediately don't feel good.

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

You need the buffering activity to continue in order for you to avoid feeling the negative emotion. And this is often why we bounce from one buffering activity to another. So, we might feel the feelings, be thinking about school closing, we're feeling that grief and we don't want to feel it, so we jump into social media play.

We look through social media, and then we get like, "I shouldn't be doing this anymore," and then we get back to work for a bit. And then we find ourselves like, "I just want to play on my phone for a few minutes." Or then, we go back to work and then we grab a snack or we check out the news headlines or we catch up on some emails or we grab lunch or we just bounce around from one thing to the next, but it doesn't feel productive. It doesn't feel planned.

And in the end, it just doesn't feel good to us. It's not a positive proactive action that you're taking. So, it all sounds very innocent while you're doing it. It feels like no big deal. But in the end, buffering is a net negative gain for you. It adds unwanted pounds if you're a snacker, or it's a time-suck if you're scrolling through news or social media or talking on the phone just to feel better and avoid the emotion.

It doesn't feel fulfilling or productive. And it doesn't add value to your work or to your life in the way that you want it to. It feels very disappointing. It's that feeling of, like, your brain's thinking, "What did I do with the day? Where did the time go? I didn't get anything done." And then you think back to how you really spent your time and you're like, "Oh, that wasn't productive. That didn't get me what I wanted."

And the feeling's still there. That's because the thoughts are still there but you haven't addressed them or haven't allowed them because you've been

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

trying so hard to avoid it. So, you're basically losing out time or you're creating a physical reaction in your body that is a net negative for you.

And buffering is really sneaky. We don't often realize that, in the moment, we're buffering. Our brain just thinks that we're doing something comfortable. And it feels good in the moment. We kind of get that hit of, like, relief, "This feels great."

So, for a while, we are in the moment of that, it feels really good, and then we'll have an awareness. Our brain will wake up and we're like, "Whoa," we snap into that awareness that we're actually engaged in something that's not helping us in the long run.

So, how do you avoid buffering? You don't completely avoid it. What you do is you notice it because you first have to be aware of all the ways your brain prefers to buffer and notice when you're engaging in that activity.

So, for me, I notice that I will all of a sudden be cleaning something. When I'm at work on my computer and I'm frustrated with something or I've been pounding away trying to create something for a long time and it's just not flowing and I'm feeling that cognitive dissonance of, like, wanting it done and not being able to get it done, all of a sudden, I find myself jumping up. And I'm cleaning something or I'm tidying something or I'm putting something away, my brain is very clever at thinking of these little tasks, "We've got to get those done. You've been meaning to do this. Let's do that for five minutes. It's only going to take five minutes."

Your brain is very convincing and it's very sneaky. So, be aware of the ways that you tend to buffer, that your brain gravitates towards when you're feeling something that's of discomfort, it's on the negative end of the emotional spectrum.

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

Because once you're aware of them, it's much easier to catch yourself doing it right away. So, I could do a whole podcast on buffering, but I want you just to acknowledge and notice that buffering exists. It's part of how we take good care of ourselves and how we mitigate some of our emotional suffering. But that in the end, if buffering becomes a consistent response to avoiding emotion, it can have a net negative gain.

So, just be aware of it. I can teach more about buffering on a future podcast. But just practice being aware of all the ways that you like to buffer. Do you tend to be a snacker? Do you tend to stop and make a phone call? Do you scroll on social media or get on your phone and follow the news or play a game on your phone? What is it that you're doing?

Or you're cleaning like me. I could easily find a million things to do around the house that distract me from having to get my work done. So, just notice and acknowledge the buffering techniques that you gravitate towards.

Okay, number two, the second way we handle grief is by resisting it. Resisting painful emotions, it's similar to avoiding them in the sense that you still don't believe that you should have to feel them.

So, when you're avoiding, your brain is like, "That is a bad idea. We're not doing that. We're not even going there." Complete in fight, flight, or freeze. You are fleeing away from them. When you resist, you're kind of acknowledging that they're there, that you're feeling badly, but you don't think that you should have to feel them and you're upset that you're feeling the way you're feeling.

So, you are adding resistance to the pain that you're feeling. And when you resist emotion, you beat yourself up for having the emotion in the first place. So, you have the negative emotion, and then you add a layer of

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

judgment and you scold yourself, beat yourself up for the bad feelings or the sad feelings, which makes you feel even worse.

Many principals have a belief that it's your job to be strong for your staff and be positive all the time and bring that positive energy and fake it until you make it. So, when you feel sad or weak at times, you tell yourself that you shouldn't be feeling that way, and what's wrong with you? And you judge yourself and you question yourself and you're harsh with yourself.

You resist the emotions because you believe that they shouldn't be there, that you shouldn't be feeling them. And that resistance creates more tension. So, resisting, it's what my brain loves to do. First it avoids, it cleans, and then it gets down to business at resisting it and very angry.

Just today, I was having so much resistance. My Microsoft Word updated on my computer and it's now doing some crazy autocorrecting that I have no idea what's going on and I just was so mad that it was happening and I had to laugh at myself because while I'm writing a podcast about resistance, I'm in resistance. Pretty funny.

But as you guys know, whatever we're thinking, it always shows up in our results. So, I was resisting, it shouldn't be happening, I was getting frustrated because I wanted the podcast done. It took me so much longer because I was mad that I was mad. So, just know, all of that crazy train that is going on in your head, it's totally, totally normal.

So, the third way that we process grief is to allow it. What? We allow grief? What's that about? We have to acknowledge and allow our pain and our grief and our sadness about the end of the school year, about the loss of connection with our students and staff, about our own goals and dreams, about their goals and dreams, about the frustrations of working from home.

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

How many of you, by the way, said before all of this, “God, if I could just work from home, if I could just not come into work today, if I could just figure out how to not be in so many meetings?” We’ve been given the chance, and now we’re noticing, it’s not all that we thought it would be.

So, allowing the frustration and the grief and the overwhelm, all the things, all the emotions, is how you actually get through them. And one way to help yourself feel intense emotions is to describe how it feels inside your body.

Emotions are a vibration in the body. It’s just the body’s response to a thought you’re having. So, your brain is producing thoughts, your body has a response to those thoughts through a vibration. The body can’t express itself in language but it can express itself in energetic vibration.

So, when you’re having an intense emotion, you can soften it or allow it by acknowledging that it’s there and you can do that by describing how the body is responding. Where do you feel the emotion? What does the emotion feel like?

If you were describing this emotion to somebody who’s never experienced it before, how would you put it into words? And you can also give the emotion a shape, a color, a size. The more detail that you can use to describe the emotion that you’re feeling inside of your body, the easier it becomes to allow it.

And what’s even more amazing is that the more you’re able to allow it and describe it, the more quickly it dissipates. So, for example, today when I was feeling really frustrated about the new update in my Microsoft Word document, my body was ringing with frustration. I could feel it from my head to my toes.

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

I felt a tightness in my jaw and in my temples. I felt like almost a lump in my throat, because when I get frustrated I tend to cry, and so I felt that lump coming, but more of an anger lump than a sadness lump. I felt it, you know, in my shoulder blades, my hands were clenched. I was grabbing my thighs.

So, what I'm saying is you can describe everywhere that you feel that emotion in your body and you can say, it feels tight, or it feels like a knot, or it feels like butterflies, or it feels twitchy, or it feels like shaky or it feels tingly.

You have to put it into your own words. But when you start to describe it, your brain will be like, "Oh, okay, my body is having some reaction in the form of an emotion. It feels like heavy. It feels like a brick." It feels like mine was kind of purple. But just describing the emotion can help you allow it.

And finally, I want to say that the fear of feeling is often much worse than the feeling itself. Our brain perceives intense emotions as life-threatening, which is why it does everything possible to convince you to avoid it or resist it. But if you can learn how to lean in and describe it and observe it and allow it, you will create evidence in your brain that there's nothing to be scared of and you can handle the emotion. And once you learn how to handle any emotion, you can do anything because you won't fear feeling an emotion.

Something else I've learned is that the more intense an emotion, the more likely it is to have an impact on your actions. So, when you're feeling kind of neutral about something, when you're feeling a little bit of emotion about something, it doesn't as much impact your decisions.

You can feel a little bit uncomfortable about having to get on Zoom, but it doesn't make you not get on Zoom. You can do it anyway. Or when you

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

slightly like something or it's slightly, like – I don't love going to the grocery store, but I also don't hate it. So, it's just a thing that I do.

It doesn't make me not go to the store. I just go. And when you're feeling extreme intensity, it's much more likely that that intense emotion has an impact on your action. So, when you're feeling deep, deep grief, you might not be able to get up and go to work, to get up and do the dishes or clean your house or even take a shower.

You might have to process those emotions because the emotion can overtake the action, if that makes sense. So, just notice that if you're really in a space of intense emotion, that it's going to have a greater impact on your ability to take action, or on the decision of action that you take.

And it is totally okay to decide to allow yourself to process emotion and not do something versus resisting it and avoiding it altogether. So, just keep this in mind. And hey, I know this is a lot. It's deep, it's intense, it requires you not just to think, but to feel. It requires you to connect your mind and your body.

And if you want to learn more about how to navigate intense emotions, you have to come check out my personalized coaching programs. This is exactly what they are designed to do.

I have become an expert as a life coach for school leaders and I am helping leaders navigate these intense emotions. This program is the ultimate in personalized professional development for school leaders.

Learning this one skill, my friends, will forever impact the way that you lead your school and you live your life. So, simply schedule a free consult call with me using the link in the show notes. We get on a call together, we talk

[The Empowered Principal Podcast](#) with Angela Kelly

Ep 126: Saying Goodbye to the End of the Year

it through, we make a decision to work together, and we get busy impacting the way that you lead.

I hope this has been helpful. If so, let me know. Share your thoughts with me on Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Twitter, wherever you find yourself buffering, and have the most empowered week. Take care, bye-bye.

Hey, principals, listen up. I've created a professional learning program for you and your team to build your capacity and lead your staff through the empowerment process. I've designed personalized growth experience for you and your school. You'll learn how to apply the leadership triad to empower your staff and students.

This is the moment where the perfect time and opportunity meet. Education will never be the same and I have the tools to help you navigate the change. To learn more, sign up for a free consultation at angelakellycoaching.com/programs. I'll see you on the inside.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *The Empowered Principal Podcast*. If you enjoyed this episode and want to learn more, please visit AngelaKellyCoaching.com where you can sign up for weekly updates and learn more about the tools that will help you become an emotionally fit school leader.